

ADJUSTMENT OF THE VISUALLY  
HANDICAPPED

P. C. Potts

HV 1593 P





AMERICAN FOUNDATION  
FOR THE BLIND INC.



HV 1593  
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Journal of Exceptional Children  
v. 11, No. 6, March, 1945

## Adjustment of the Visually Handicapped

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THE problems of the visually handicapped are many and various, but they differ decidedly from the ideas in regard to them which are entertained by most seeing persons. In fact, many of the problems of the blind are created or intensified by a lack of understanding, or by a definite misunderstanding of their problems by the general public. We trust that to some extent we may be able to clarify certain of these misconceptions.

The first and most important problem of a blind person is to become personally adjusted to his environment. Blind persons differ from each other even more than seeing persons because, besides the ordinary variations due to personality differences, they are handicapped by varying degrees of blindness and have become blind at different ages. The blind child's adjustment takes place gradually as he grows up, while the adult who becomes blind later in life feels the impact of his unaccustomed limitations and endeavors to remove or surmount them as quickly as possible. The blind

child who has wise parents who provide him with proper sources of stimulation and adequate learning situations, and who has brothers and sisters or other intimate playmates, may enter a school for the blind almost normal in his development. Thereafter his progress is guided by special teachers and aided by special equipment and appliances. His individual advancement will depend largely upon his capacity to learn. The great danger is that he may become adjusted to institutional life among blind people rather than to normal life among seeing people.

The situation of the blinded adult naturally is quite different. His life having been spent among the seeing must now undergo changes since blindness makes many of his previous activities impossible. These changes are not nearly so great as might be supposed, but many of them cannot be effected immediately. The assistance of an understanding home teacher, and a placement agent who is trained to give vocational guidance, will do much to

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The accompanying article is adapted from a paper presented at the Institute on Vocational Rehabilitation held at the University of Wisconsin, July 10-14, 1944.



# HEARING SURVEY IN DETROIT SCHOOLS

## Recommendations

Return after removal of wax .....	11
Return after tonsil and adenoid removal .....	8
Return for re-examination .....	2
Return for nasal septum when 17 years .....	11
Return after removal of adenoids .....	4
Eye examination .....	1
Removal of mole at right molar .....	1
Information from parents .....	12

## School B (30 Pupils)

Total with previous case history .....	4	13
Total with communicable disease history .....	20	67
Total giving history at the time of the tests .....	15	50

## Recommendations

Return after wax removal .....	2
Return after tonsil and adenoid removal .....	6
Return for re-examination .....	4
Return after adenoid removal .....	13
Return for nasal septum when 17 years .....	15
Individual audiometer test .....	1
Information from parents .....	12

The writer wishes to state that the reliability of pupils answering the questions pertaining to the history of the ears, which appears at the bottom of the test sheets, is questionable. Some pupils are not aware of their previous ear histories, some do not answer the questions correctly, while perhaps there are others who feel that "they must write something."

## SELECTION OF PUPILS FOR LIP READING INSTRUCTION

Since reports of pupils with impaired hearing in the different schools in which the hearing tests were conducted have been sent to the schools, it is possible to select those with severe hearing impairment for lip reading. Since an extensive follow-

up from both medical and educational standpoints has not been made as yet, it has not been determined which pupils with various degrees of impaired hearing will be examined and studied first. Consequently, it has not been determined which pupils will be selected for lip reading instruction. The possible program for the present school year is an extensive follow-up of the pupils who have been discovered to have impaired hearing.

During the school year, 1940-41, two lip reading teachers have been working in the regular schools teaching lip reading to hard of hearing pupils. At the present time there are three lip reading teachers.

The following is a summary of the

(Continued on page 186)



make the life of the blind person almost normal again. In the case of both the child and the adult this adjustment will naturally depend upon the personality of the individual. The child's developing personality is shaped very largely by his parents, teachers, and playmates; the adult's personality has already been formed but will now be greatly influenced by his physical handicap. This adjustment affects his whole being. It is physical, psychological, social, and especially economic.

#### ORIENTATION TO SURROUNDINGS

First, he must become oriented to his surroundings; he must learn in the dark to determine direction and distance. He must remember where things are, and learn how to go from place to place. At first he may have to depend upon a guide; later he may prefer to use only a cane. He must pay particular attention to the way in which he walks, stands, and sits, so that he will not attract undesirable attention. He must plan his recreations so that they include desirable physical activities. Nature will help in his adjustment. At first he will labor under considerable strain and suffer a certain amount of tenseness. He will exercise a high degree of concentration upon everything which goes on around him and endeavor to remember everything which he believes may prove of value. Later this concentration will become more selective and his memory will gradually improve. Other senses will come to his aid. Because he can no longer depend upon sight, he will endeavor to make as much use as possible of hearing, touch, smell and taste. And as he makes more and more intelligent use of these senses he will become aware of and be able to profit by

sensations and impressions to which the ordinary seeing person pays little or no attention. As the navigator becomes able to distinguish objects invisible to the landsman, so the blind man learns to interpret sounds unheard by his seeing companion. From such circumstances arise many false ideas in regard to the sensory capacities of blind persons. Their senses are no keener—in some instances even one or more of the others may be impaired—but the blind pay greater attention to their sensory impressions and use them more intelligently.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

Second, the lack of sight necessitates certain psychological adjustments. All blind persons are different, but they have much in common. Their emotions, their thinking, and their actions are influenced to some extent by their blindness. These, however, depend upon past experiences, and it makes a decided difference whether most of these experiences have been acquired with or without sight. The degree of blindness and the age at which it occurs have a great effect upon each individual's mental life. Too little careful study has been made of the psychology of blindness. Standard intelligence and achievement tests have been adapted for use with blind pupils and have been used in a number of schools for the blind. The results indicate "at least a two-year retardation in school work and in the abilities our intelligence tests measure." Specialized tests of practical information show "besides the confusions and misunderstandings observed in seeing children, various special mistakes and difficulties due to the handicap of blindness. In general,



standardized tests of school achievement show just about the degree of inferiority to the seeing which one would expect from their (the blind pupils') grade retardation. In special lines, like the development of vocabulary, an even greater deficiency is shown."<sup>1</sup>

Several blind persons have recorded the ideas about blindness which they have derived from personal experience and intimate association with other blind persons, but they differ widely in their views concerning the general characteristics of blind people. A few quotations from some of them will be interesting at this point. One writer<sup>2</sup> says, "Blindness in no way affects the mentality in its development." "Sight discloses little that the blind may not be made to understand the reason therefore." "Both hearing and touch carry more accurate knowledge than vision." "What, then, does he (the blind man) lack, and what faculties or functions are added to him by the sense of sight? A conception of colors, of perspective and certain physical beauties; and that is all. Aside from these, there are no intellectual conceptions that thorough teaching may not convey to even the congenitally blind." "All that appeals to the imagination has a singular fascination for the blind." "The necessity that compels the blind to intrust many things to memory is calculated to largely develop that faculty in them," but "Although the blind are now compelled to use the memory more than

those who see, as a rule they do use it only ordinarily well."

Another author<sup>3</sup> writes, "Sight is the master sense. The implications of losing it strike too deep and reach too far to be grasped vicariously." "Normally, sight accounts for 80 to 90 per cent of all impressions." "Regardless of the individual, blindness changes just about everything. It means a complete sensory revolution." "Touch is the sense whose usefulness is most overrated. Its sensitivity depends in large measure on the condition of the skin. The perspective of touch is limited by the length of the arms. Touch can register only impressions of form, texture and relative size." "Hearing is the blind man's hard-driven work horse. It supplies perhaps 75 per cent of all the impressions he receives." It is the blind man's most inclusive sense; his most perceptive sense; his chief avenue of communication, but "the seeing tend to overrate the value of hearing. Actually, it is a second-rate sense. It is non-selective. A desired sound can be separated from others only by mental concentration." "The necessity of expending more nervous energy on the mechanics of living means quicker fatigue, hence the greater likelihood of irritability or instability. More important, however, is the sense of inadequacy with which the blind man must cope. It takes stern self-discipline to avoid such inadequacy responses as self-pity, rationalization or outright neurosis."

<sup>1</sup> Hayes, Samuel P., *Contributions to a Psychology of Blindness*, 1941, American Foundation for the Blind, New York.

<sup>2</sup> de La Sizeranne, Maurice, *The Blind as Seen Through Blind Eyes*, 1893, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Adams, Charles Magee, "This Business of Being Blind," *What of the Blind*, Vol. II, 1941, American Foundation for the Blind, New York.



A third writer<sup>4</sup> says, "Blindness does not affect the individuality, but leaves it intact." "No mental faculty of the blind is affected in any way." The intelligence of the blind is not only equal to that of those who see, but it does not differ in nature; it is not distinguished by any special characteristics." "There are very few notions that a blind man cannot acquire, because there are very few which come to us uniquely by means of the eyes." "Sight is a long distance touch, with the sensation of colour added. Touch is near sight minus the sensation of colour, and with the sensation of rugosity added. The two senses give us knowledge of the same order." "It is not by the eye, but by the hand that, from the sensorial point of view, man is distinguished from the animal." "Aristotle said that sight was the most important of all the faculties for the needs of animals, but for the intelligence, hearing was more necessary." "It is by means of language that our minds are elevated to the conception of general and abstract ideas."

And a fourth author<sup>5</sup> says, "It is generally supposed that blindness represents the mere absence or impairment of a single sense. On the contrary, blindness changes and utterly reorganizes the entire mental life of the individual." "No single mental activity of the congenitally blind child is not distorted by the absence of sight. Not a single sense escapes; the sensory equipment and processes of observing are organized quite differ-

ently in the blind from the normal seeing child." "Neither the seeing nor the blind fully realize the difference that exists between their respective worlds of experience and reality." "The most objective sort of human experience is visual experience. It gives detail which no other sense can provide." "Educational methods hamper the intellectual growth of the blind through their insistence upon the employment of artificial verbal learning and artificial visual concepts." "The characteristic emotional disturbances result from the social situations that blindness creates and not from the sensory privation in itself."

#### SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

Third, blindness revolutionizes a person's social life. A blind person is more restricted in getting about and in some of his social activities. He is not understood and he is not quite sure how welcome he is or will be in unaccustomed company. He may either depend too much upon his family, or, fearing to become burdensome, may hesitate to ask for assistance and forego many former pleasures. There are many activities in which a blind person can engage and which he will enjoy, and he should pay particular attention to those which seeing persons prefer, such as card games, bowling, swimming and hiking, in order that he may participate in such forms of recreation with them. If he acts naturally and without constraint in the company of others, they will soon learn to act naturally in his presence. It seems to be impossible for most seeing persons to understand blind people. They either overemphasize or minimize the differences between them. In the first instance they are

<sup>4</sup> Villev. Pierre. *The World of the Blind: a Psychological Study*, 1930, The Macmillan Co., New York.

<sup>5</sup> Cutsforth, Thomas D., *The Blind in School and Society*, 1933, D. Appleton & Co., New York.



too solicitous—they want to do too much for the blind person and not to allow him to do enough for himself; in the second they don't offer to help him even with things that he cannot possibly do for himself. The blind man can get about unaided in familiar surroundings; he can take care of his personal belongings; he can carry on his daily occupation; he can plan most of his own recreation, involving some physical exercise, reading, music and listening to the radio. But he does enjoy companionship when he goes to a ball game or to the theater. He appreciates finding things always in the same place instead of under his feet or in front of his nose. He is glad to be told if there is a spot on his clothing or if his typewriter ribbon needs to be changed. His mail must be read to him, or in the office, read to the dictaphone. He appreciates being asked to go for a ride, to bowl, or play bridge or cribbage. In fact, he wants to be treated naturally, expecting to do for himself all that anyone without sight can do, and being grateful to others who do as unobtrusively as possible those things which he cannot do sufficiently well without assistance.

#### ECONOMIC STATUS OF BLIND

Fourth, the most difficult adjustment which the blind person has to make is in the economic field. If he has previously depended upon his earnings, his financial status will probably decline when he becomes blind. Although he may be encouraged to pursue the career for which he has been trained, his earning power frequently is reduced. The chances are that he may have to change his occupation. Instead of working in an office, factory

or store, he may have to work at home or in a sheltered workshop. He may even be considered unemployable and expected to subsist upon a government pension. If he has no family or intimate friends, he may have to enter a home for the blind.

No matter where the blind person lives or what he does, his cost of living will be much higher. He will have to pay for a certain amount of guide service and reading. A telephone will be a necessity, and it will be important that he live near a bus or a car line and not too far from stores and a church. He will need to have more clothing and will have to have his clothes cleaned and repaired more frequently. He will be expected to give many tips for little services received, even though he might prefer to do some of the things for himself. If he owns a home he will have to pay for minor repairs and improvements about the house and grounds which a seeing person could easily take care of. If he is in business or a profession, he must have his mail read to him, information gathered, and other assistance rendered. He will also have to depend to a larger extent upon taxicabs. He will have to pay an increased premium for his life insurance. The blind housewife must order most of her groceries from the more expensive stores which will deliver them, and it is safer for her to have an electric range rather than a more economical coal or gas range. Because a coal furnace is very difficult for a blind person to operate, she needs an oil burner, and oil costs more than coal. In fact, almost everything costs a blind person more than a seeing person and it is extremely difficult for him to economize.



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### ATTITUDES OF EMPLOYERS

The most unfortunate thing about blindness is the general public's lack of understanding of it. The social aspect of this situation is bad enough, but the economic aspect is worse. Social workers, home teachers, and vocational guidance personnel can aid in the physical, psychological and social adjustment of blinded persons and can do much to render them employable, but they can do only *their* part in regard to placement. That depends largely upon the great mass of employers, and in normal times employers have been so skeptical in regard to the ability of blind persons to really earn regular wages from day to day in many fields that they have given all sorts of excuses as reasons for not hiring them. At a recent meeting of the American Foundation for the Blind, the Migel medal for outstanding service to the blind was presented by Dr. Helen Keller to Mr. Henry Ford for his broadminded and farsighted policy of employing blind workers on the same basis as seeing workers during the past twenty-five years. The following statement in regard to this policy was made by Mr. Edsel Ford<sup>6</sup> about a year ago. "A good many firms in this country have always known that individuals impaired physically in some respect frequently have perfectly adequate capabilities for some jobs. Now, under the prompting of a man - power pinch, recognition of the usefulness of the physically handicapped is spreading to all the country's industries and services. Our company is one of those which have for a long time believed in and practiced the utilization of phy-

sically impaired workers. Today we employ 1,208 totally or partially blind men: 111 of our employees are deaf mutes. There are, in addition, 135 who suffer from epilepsy; 91 with but one arm; 3 with both arms amputated; 260 with one arm crippled; 157 with one leg amputated; 101 others suffering from crippled conditions of the legs; 10 with both legs amputated; 139 with spine curvatures; 322 with organic heart ailments. All together, 11,163 men in various stages of disability are receiving full pay. The blind men receive from 95 cents to \$1.15 an hour. These figures are for the River Rouge industrial area. One of the sightless men has been with the company 24 years, and is now 74. No company regards such employment as charity or altruism. All our handicapped workers give full value for their wages and their tasks are carried out with absolutely no allowances or special considerations. Our real assistance to them has been merely the discovery of tasks which would develop their usefulness. Their fellow-workers are highly cooperative."

The present war has wrought a decided change in the employment situation. Blind persons are being sought out and, with little or no special training, are being employed at jobs which they themselves as well as many others had not previously realized that they could do. Of course, the pendulum will swing back after the war is over, but it is hoped and believed that many blind workers have so thoroughly convinced their employers of the wisdom of employing blind persons that they and many of their fellows will have steady, profitable employment. In addition, the general public must be better informed about the blind and we

<sup>6</sup>The New Beacon. June 15, 1943, National Institute for the Blind, London.



should give more attention to their education along this line.

#### IMPORTANCE OF PLACEMENT AGENTS

In order to obtain employment, blind persons must have the assistance of competent placement agents, who know about blind people *and* about industry, and who can demonstrate by example as well as precept that blind persons can do many specific jobs satisfactorily. During the past two years blind as well as seeing agents have placed hundreds of blind workers in factories and mills. Some of these are in war plants, the products and processes of which will be greatly altered as soon as the war is over. Others are engaged in regular industry. It is hoped that the latter may be able to retain their jobs and that many of those who are doing war work can transfer to peacetime occupations involving similar skills.

Placement agents should, of course, endeavor to place as many as possible of their blind clients in jobs which will persist after the war. Many of these now pay lower wages and some persons prefer to take a chance and continue to get the higher wages while "the getting is good." They know that if they do not find another job when they lose their present one, they can always fall back on their pension. Some of those who are now engaged in war industry are frozen in their jobs and cannot transfer to less essential work, so they will have to hope for the best in the future. It is important that placement agents for the blind do not take too great advantage of the present situation and place poor candidates in good positions. This would provide only temporary employment for them and would probably result in that

firm's refusal to employ other blind persons. It is also important that blind workers be given sufficient help on the job so that they may not only "make good" but achieve the largest possible measure of success. It will be much better if placement agents, instead of devoting all of their attention to establishing a reputation by a great number of placements, will do sufficient preliminary and follow-up work with both employers and workers so that their clients will be able to hold their jobs during a coming depression. More important than the placement of workers is the convincing of employers that blind persons are desirable employees at all times—when workers are plentiful as well as when they are hard to find. This is especially desirable at this time because we shall soon have several hundred blinded servicemen to place and we should prepare the way for them.

In conclusion, let me say that social workers, visiting teachers, psychiatrists and physiotherapists can play a large part in the adjustment of blind persons to their environment. Their social and economic adjustment depends mainly upon the attitude toward them of family, friends, the general public, and employers of labor. If we treat them as a class, as different from ourselves, offering them only sympathy, charity and pensions, but not offering them understanding, companionship and assistance, we shall make both their social and their psychological adjustment very difficult. If employers consider the blind as the least employable of the physically handicapped, the last to be hired and the first to be fired, their satisfactory economic adjustment will be impossible.







